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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of aggressive, neutral, and prosocial television programs on the way in which preschool children handle frustration. Subjects were 39 girls and 47 boys, ages 4.0 to 5.6, enrolled in a nine week summer nursery school program that met three times a week. During the middle four weeks, subjects were shown a total of 12 of one of three types of television program: aggressive, neutral, or prosocial. The Social Interaction task was administered to pairs of same-sex children immediately after a television program. The task consisted of building structures difficult for children of that age. Behavior was scored by a concealed observer. Interpersonal aggression was scored whenever there was physical or verbal aggression. Prosocial interpersonal behaviors included cooperation, helping, sharing, and verbalization of feelings. Results indicate that, for preschool boys, violent television promotes a heavy reliance of aggressive methods of dealing with frustration and that prosocial television programming promotes a reliance on prosocial means of dealing with frustration. No significant effects of television content on preschool girls were indicated. Findings are compared to those of a larger study of which this study was part. (SB)

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THE EFFECTS OF AGGRESSIVE AND PROSOCIAL TELEVISION PROGRAMS ON THE SOCIAL INTERACTION OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

Aletha Huston Stein, Lynette Kohn Friedrich, Francine Deutsch, and Corinne Nydegger

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The Effects of Aggressive and Prosocial Television Programs on the Social Interaction of Preschool Children

Aletha Huston Stein, Lynette Kohn Friedrich, Francine Deutsch, and Corinne Nydegger

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of aggressive and prosocial television programs on the social interaction of preschool children. There is now an overwhelming body of evidence showing that young children perform aggressive behavior as a result of observing aggressive models (see Feshbach, 1970). In many of these studies, however, the modeled behavior was contrived by the experimenter and the dependent measures were playful forms of imitative aggression such as hitting Bobo dolls. More recent reports have shown increases in real interpersonal aggression following exposure to violent, commercial television programs. (Liebert & Baron, 1972; Murray, Rubenstein & Comstock, 1972; Steuer et. al., 1971). In only one of these studies, however, were children actually together during measurement. The others used simulation techniques of some kind.

In the study that I will report here, we were particularly interested in what children learn from television about ways of handling frustration or conflict. Many violent programs present aggression, not merely as a neutral form of behavior, but as a highly successful way of resolving frustration and conflict. We expected, therefore, that children would be especially likely to imitate television violence if they were exposed to frustration.

We conceptualized prosocial behaviors as alternative means of dealing with frustration that can also be learned, in principle, from television. There are some experimental imitation studies showing that children will

imitate prosocial behaviors such as delay of gratification, altruism, and self-denial (see Hoffman, 1970), but there has been very little attention to the possible impact of prosocial television content. In the present study, we explored the effects of a television program that stresses prosocial behavior on children's cooperation, helping, sharing, and verbalization of their own feelings.

This study was part of a larger investigation of the effects of television that was conducted by Lynette Friedrich and myself for the Surgeon General's Committee on Television and Social Behavior. As a part of that study, 97 children were enrolled in a nine-week summer nursery school program. During the middle four weeks, they were shown one of three types of television programs or films, 1)Aggressive programs - "Batman" and "Superman" cartoons, 2) Prosocial programs - "Misterrogers Neighborhood", and 3) Neutral films - miscellaneous childrens films with little or no aggressive or prosocial content. The nursery school met three days a week; each child saw one program in his or her assigned treatment per day. Thus, each saw a total of twelve programs. The children viewed the programs in groups of five to ten in small rooms near the nursery school rooms.

The participants in the social interaction task that I will report here were 39 girls and 47 boys, age ranging from 4.0 to 5.6 years old. There was a wide range of parental occupations, but the sample was predominantly middle class (mean father's education = 14.7 years; mean mother's education 13.7 years). The sample was slightly above average in IQ (mean = 112). Most of the subjects lived in a small city; the remainder were from rural families who were fairly poor. All but three children were Caucasian.

The Social Interaction task was administered to pairs of same-sex children immediately following one of the television programs in their

series. The children were given a modified set of Creative Playthings Multi-Rollway blocks that include ramps, blocks of different sizes, and blocks with openings through which a marble can roll. Structures can be built so that a marble will roll down a series of ramps. Even with modifications to make the task easier, it is difficult for children of this age because the components must be carefully balanced in order for the structure to stay intact. Thus, it appeared to be a frustrating task for most children. The children were given a small number of blocks and one marble in order to assure interaction. They were left alone for 10 minutes.

All children saw at least four television programs or films in their treatment condition before receiving the Social Interaction task. Because two children were tested after each viewing session, the particular television program that immediately preceded the Social Interaction observation differed for different subjects. Thus, there were minor differences in the immediate stimulus conditions for different subjects. Therefore, the results may have more generality than those based on a single program.

The behavior of both children was scored by a concealed observer. Interpersonal aggression was scored whenever there was physical or verbal aggression. The prosocial interpersonal behaviors included cooperation, helping, sharing and verbalization of feelings.

RESULTS

The mean interpersonal aggression scores for boys and girls in the three conditions are shown in Table 1. Because the scores were skewed, they were transformed into logarithims for analysis, but I have included the raw scores in Table 1 so that you can get some feeling for their magnitude. The raw scores represent the number of times the behavior was scored for each child in the ten minute observation period.

The principal finding from the analysis of variance was a significant sex x condition interaction. As you can see from the means, both boys and girls had relatively high aggression scores after seeing aggressive television. However, the boys in the neutral condition also had high aggression scores. The boys in the prosocial television condition had low aggression scores. The girls in the neutral condition were low and the girls in the prosocial condition were nearly as high as those in the aggressive television condition. These results alone do not suggest that aggressive television necessarily leads to increased aggressive behavior, but I think they do make some sense, at least for boys, when examined in relation to the prosocial interpersonal behavior findings.

The mean prosocial interpersonal behavior scores also appear in Table 1. You will recall that this category includes cooperation, helping, sharing, and verbalization of feelings. Again, there is a sex x condition interaction, but it is of borderline significance ($.05 > p > .10$). The pattern of scores for the boys is as predicted-- those in the prosocial condition are highest and those in the aggressive condition are lowest. However, the boys in the neutral condition are closer to those in the prosocial condition. This suggests that the aggressive films may have led to a decline in prosocial behavior. This means for the girls are essentially the same in the three conditions.

If we put the findings for the two types of behavior together, they form a fairly coherent pattern for boys. Boys shown aggressive television show high levels of aggression and low levels of prosocial behavior. Boys shown the prosocial programs have high levels of prosocial behavior and low levels of aggressive behavior. Those shown neutral films have relatively high levels of both types of behavior. We initially conceived of these two types of behavior as alternative ways of dealing with frustration and conflict. As the experimental task was intended to be mildly frustrating, it is perhaps not surprising that the boys in the neutral group demonstrated aggressive behavior. Nevertheless, those in the aggressive television condition appeared to rely more exclusively on aggression in their interpersonal behavior without the balance of cooperation and verbalizing feelings that the neutral film group showed. On the other hand, those in the prosocial television condition relied almost solely on prosocial ways of interacting with their partners. These findings support the idea that television can teach or promote either aggression or prosocial behavior as alternatives for dealing with frustration.

Now I'd like to compare the findings from the social interaction measure with those from the larger study of which this was a part (Stein & Friedrich, 1973). The principal dependent measures in the larger study were free play behavior observations in the classroom using categories similar to those used in the social interaction task. In free play, we found no support for the idea that aggression and prosocial behavior were alternatives. Aggressive programs did not lower prosocial interpersonal behavior in the classroom, nor did prosocial programs lower aggressive behavior. One important difference is that the situation in which the social interaction observations were made was a frustrating one whereas most of the classroom observations did not involve frustrating situations. The notion of aggressive and prosocial behavior as alternatives may apply primarily to frustrating circumstances.

In the larger study the children's baseline levels of aggressive behavior predicted the impact of the violent television programs. Children who were above the group median during the baseline period showed more interpersonal aggression after seeing violent programs than after seeing neutral films. Those below the median on the baseline measure did not show differences in behavior as a function of television viewing. We did analyze the social interaction data for effects of baseline classroom behavior, but there were no differences between those high and low on the baseline. One reason may be that the social interaction task was administered immediately after the television programs in a room very close to the television viewing setting. The impact of the programs may, therefore have been greater than in the classroom. Probably more important, the behavior of a child in the social interaction situation was affected by the behavior of his or her partner. A fairly non-aggressive child might be stimulated to greater aggression if paired with an aggressive child. Our pairs were arbitrarily selected, and they often contained children of both high and low baseline levels.

Finally, in the larger study, girls responded in much the same ways boys did. In the social interaction task, girls showed no differences in prosocial behavior as a function of television viewing, and their patterns of aggression are difficult to interpret. One reason may be that the task had less appeal for girls. Our observers reported informally that girls engaged in more task irrelevant behavior such as sitting and talking rather than playing with the blocks. Therefore, the situation may have been less involving and less frustrating for them.

In summary, the findings of the present study provide some evidence that, for preschool boys, violent television promotes a heavy reliance of aggressive methods of dealing with frustration and prosocial television programming promotes the reliance on prosocial means of dealing with frustration.

While there are other data showing effects of television on girls, this study did not find reliable effects of television content on preschool girls.

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Table 1

Mean Interpersonal Aggression and Prosocial Interpersonal Behavior for Boys and Girls in Three Television Conditions

	Means of Logarithims			Means of Raw Scores		
	Aggressive Television	Neutral Films	Prosocial Television	Aggressive Television	Neutral Films	Prosocial Television
	Interpersonal Aggression			Interpersonal Aggression		
Males (N=47)	.50	.56	.09	3.42	4.19	0.29
Females (N=39)	.48	.16	.40	3.21	0.73	2.38
Both	.49	.43	.23	3.31	3.00	1.30
	Prosocial Interpersonal Behavior			Prosocial Interpersonal Behavior		
Males	.50	.74	.86	2.83	6.10	7.85
Females	.76	.64	.71	5.64	5.18	5.00
Both	.64	.71	.79	4.35	5.78	6.48